# Culture of Poverty Revisited

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In an earlier paper[1] I showed that the thesis of a 'culture of poverty' (COP) lends itself to pernicious political uses, by (a) seeming to attribute responsibility for poverty to poor people themselves, because of their 'culture', (b) focusing on the local and family level, ignoring the unseen forces of the wider society which determine the meagre distribution of resources to the poor, and (c) seeming to give priority to attempts to change culture, through counselling services (in rich countries) and through education. I took it for granted, however, that the question of how the culture of poor people influences their behaviour, and their poverty, is an empirical one, and that it is therefore worth looking at the available literature to see what kinds of answers it has to suggest.

Since then I have become increasingly alarmed by the ease with which otherwise subtle, discriminating persons reject the very idea of a culture of poverty—not only in saloon bars and over dinner tables, but in serious academic discussion. The Roaches' book of readings on poverty provides an example. The book confines COP to a footnote in the introduction, on the grounds that, 'The thesis of a culture of poverty is such a hazy notion that we have doubts about its descriptive value, not to mention its explanatory significance'.[2] Significantly enough the book contains several case studies of the life of specific groups of poor people, and other essays which deal in a generalizing way with problems of measurement, causes and remedies; but not a single attempt to deal in a generalizing way with the lifeways and culture of poor people—to see whether there are not some similarities in the way that urban slum dwellers of Palermo, Calcutta, Sao Paulo, perceive their situation, in the values they (consciously and unconsciously) hold, and in the effects of these common perceptions and values on response to changes in their situation. The Roaches dismiss COP on grounds of haziness; a more constructive reaction would be to make it less hazy. The usual reason for rejecting it, however, is because of its pernicious political role, its use by politicians and planners to explain the failure of their programmes to reduce poverty, to explain their concentration on low-cost education and counselling rather than on more expensive and more directly redistributive measures, or to justify the failure to have any redistributive programmes at all. Hence it is often said that one should pay attention to COP only insofar as it is something which politicians and planners commonly believe; in this sense only does COP matter.

**Truth and political implication**

This conclusion, it seems to me, rests on a serious confusion between empirical truth-content, on the one hand, and ideological origins and political uses on the other (a confusion not unrelated to the wholesale retreat of traditional empiricism in British and American universities).

Here I can do little more than restate the distinction as I see it. While an understanding of the ideological bases and political roles of 'scientific' hypotheses can help explain and predict both their empirical weaknesses and the conditions in which they become popular among certain groups or classes, this understanding does not speak directly to the truth of those hypotheses. In the case of the COP thesis, there are at least three major hypotheses, all conceivably capable of being questioned by empirical data. But the sweeping rejection of COP ideas is in my experience generally done prior to a careful consideration of the evidence. It is true that most of the evidence used to support a COP interpretation—for example, correlations between income, on the one hand, and on the other, questionnaire responses which suggest the degree to which the respondent sees the world as an unpredictable place—is not very reliable. But the fact that the evidence is not very good should encourage attempts to improve it, not to ignore it.

Part of the trouble with COP, for many social scientists, is its identification of 'the poor' as a relevant analytical category. To focus on poverty and the poor, they argue, is to think about the problem of inequality in terms of statistical income distributions: the poor are those below a certain (more or less arbitrary) line, the bottom decile or quintile or 40 per cent. This is acceptable for purely descriptive purposes. But an explanation for poverty, they argue, must be set in the context of the systematic nature of class inequality. For explanatory purposes the funda-

1 "A culture of poverty?" *IDS Bulletin*, 5 (2/3), 4-30, 1973. *IDS Bulletin*, (1), 1975 titled "Cultural Dependence," contains a number of articles which pay some attention to the role of cultural factors in development.

2 J. Roach and J. Roach, eds., *Poverty: Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Press, 1972, p.12, n.4.

mental characteristic is not poverty but subordination: it is because of their subordination that members of the subordinate class are (or remain) poor; subordination generates poverty, not vice versa. Those who talk of poverty rather than subordination, of poor people rather than proletariat, lumpen-proletariat (or other class categories) are guilty of mystifying this point, and of supposing (like the Poverty Warriors of the American War On Poverty, if anyone still remembers) that something can be done about poverty without first altering the structure of domination and subordination which produces it.

Surely the connection between poverty and subordination is two-way: subordination generates poverty, yes; and poverty generates (or at least helps to perpetuate) subordination. Increases in the income level of members of the subordinate class may be a necessary condition for collective action to change the structure of domination and subordination. But the immediate point to make here is that whether it is called a culture of poverty or a culture of subordination, one is interested in discovering the range of responses to the facts of poverty, inequality and low status, how people in that situation manage to cope, the designs for living, the codes of understanding, the aspirations, the values they adopt.

**The current orthodoxy**

These days, however, the majority of social scientists would not in fact be interested in such matters, because they believe implicitly or explicitly that things like perceptions, aspirations, values (meaning-systems, or culture for short) are of little significance for understanding behaviour. The current orthodoxy, ascribed to by social scientists right across the academic and political spectrum, from Marxian *and* neo-classical economists, Marxian political scientists and sociologists, to social anthropologists in the tradition of Radcliffe-Brown, states that the critical factors in social causation are the distribution of resources and power, and the material and physical constraints. To these critical factors the orthodoxy (called by J. D. Y. Peel the 'situational' or 'structural' approach)[3] applies a rough and ready, common-sense view of perceptions and values: men everywhere seek much the same things (power, wealth) and perceive their environment much as it objectively is. The implication is that there are few if any circumstances when cultural factors have to be admitted as significant independent variables in social explanation. Cultural factors may of course be admitted as causes in an *ad hoc* kind of way. But this is done in the absence of any general and systematic justification for how and when such *ad hoc* incorporations are to be made. Concepts such as 'utility' and 'leisure preference' in neo-classical economics, 'false consciousness' and even 'exploitation' in Marxian analysis are used as question-stopping devices, to insulate the paradigm, to justify ending the enquiry before entering the realm of culture.

The 'situational' orthodoxy, in all its various expressions, is thus the direct descendant of the 18th century Enlightenment view of Man. Man in his essence was seen to be as regular, as invariant with respect to time and place, as wondrously simple as natural science showed the physical universe to be.

Today, situationalists adopt this view not out of a concern to define what the essence is, but as a way of allowing concentration on the real, underlying facts of resources and power. But just as the Enlightenment thinkers took the vast variety of human belief, customs and institutions as without significance for defining his nature, so modern situationalists assume that culture is gloss, garb, appearance, a mere epiphenomenon of material and physical constraints.

**Culture does matter**

Recent evidence from human biology and hominid paleontology supports a quite different intrepretation. In this view, the outstanding characteristic of *homo sapiens*, in comparison with other animals, is not so much what he is capable of learning as what he must learn in order to function at all. In place of regular and detailed genetic control mechanisms on behaviour, man has generalized genetic response capabilities, plus culture—a learned set of rules and designs (what computer engineers call programmes). The innate response capabilities, plus cultural programmes, plus situational constraints, govern behaviour.

Perhaps the best way to convince British and American situationalists that culture does matter is to ask them why they do not eat dog or cat and indeed feel revulsion at the very thought, though dog and cat are not less situationally feasible than beef and are probably equally good in nutritional value. Or why do we feed horse to dog, but not to ourselves? Why does pig, cut-for-cut, cost less than beef? Why are innards less expensive and less prestigious than muscle cuts? To understand these things we must ask about the symbolic relations between men and

3 See the excellent paper by J. D. Y. Peel for a fuller treatment of some of the points made here: "Cultural factors in the contemporary theory of development", *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, XIV, 1973, 283-303.

animals.[4] The series: cattle, pig, horse, dog is ordered according to our view of edibleness—cattle most edible, dog least. The series is also ordered according to the type of participation in the company of man. Dogs are household pets and are named. Horses, too, are petted and named; but have a work role which dogs do not have. The pig operates on the margins of society, as scavenger of human leftovers; and is not named or given a work role. Cattle are furthest removed. Hence the more the animal participates in the company of man—the closer to ourselves it becomes—the less we want to eat it. (Least of all we want to eat ourselves!) The same sort of reasoning may lie behind our preferences for muscle-cuts over innards: innards are 'closer in', to the animal self, muscle-cuts further out; so innards are stigmatised as poor man's food (the 'soulfood' of American blacks); and the price of tongue is rather less than the price of steak, although there is a good deal more steak about than tongue. This particular interpretation of edibility is clearly open to debate. All I want to insist on is that there is more to questions of edibility than nourishment or arbitrary fancy; that there is more to the question of why Jews do not eat pork than hygiene as if Moses was the first public health inspector!). More generally, it is the symbolic (cultural) organization of objects in relation to man which organizes demand and provides the intention for production. Production and consumption are cultural intentions. The situational perspective gives little illumination here.

Take another, quite unrelated example, which is somewhat closer to the burning issues of the day. Situational variables seem to be of very little help in explaining the fact that Chinese and Japanese immigrants in the United States have within two generations moved into white middle class occupations, while other immigrant groups, such as Puerto Ricans and Irish, have tended to remain in low income occupations and poor quality housing.

A study of Japanese immigrants, *from a mainly rural, peasant background,* who came (or whose parents came) to the United States with only temporary settlement in mind, showed that they had values which in some respects were remarkably similar to those of the white lower middle class, and both significantly different in these respects to those of the white working class.[5] The similarities were particularly marked in the emphasis on personal achievement of long-range goals, on goal definition in terms of higher education, professional occupations, the building of a spotless reputation in the community, diligence, and respect for authority and parental wishes. These qualities earned the praise of white teachers and employers. Hence the Japanese have succeeded more than other immigrant groups who have been longer in the United States and some of whom appear to be less handicapped by racial and cultural differences—for reasons to do with certain aspects of their *culture* in relation to the culture of lower middle and middle class America (and also, of course, to the position of these classes in the American class structure, and the responsiveness of American institutions to the standards of that culture).

**Some implications**

So what? What consequences for policies and programmes follow from the statement that different groups have different cultures, which make for differential 'success' in a given institutional setting? One reason for the rush to dismiss COP ideas[6] is the genuine desire not to 'write people off', not to say: "the Puerto Ricans don't make it in the system because of their culture". The concern is justified, but I do not agree that to recognize that differences in culture as well as in situation account for differential response to changes and programmes, leads in any logical way to 'writing people off'. It may be *used* to do so, but to counter this use requires a different sort of argument, not an attempt to deny that culture matters.

Situationalists must face the fact that in ignoring cultural factors they do make cultural assumptions, assumptions which evidence could be brought to bear on. For some questions and for some purposes, cultural factors may be justifiably ignored. But especially when examining situations of change, situationalists concerned with poverty and subordination need to be aware of their propensity to assume that the culture of poor/subordinate groups or categories does not hinder response to changes in the objective situation. It is foolhardy to claim, as some extreme situationalists have done, that people can discard their ways of adapting to relative adaptation as fast as old clothes, that no 'cultural lag' is to be expected. However there is remarkably little evidence on rates of adaptation to new situations, only conjecture and assertion. Most of the social studies of poor urban peoples have been

4 This example comes from the work of Marshall Sahlins and Edmund Leach, and follows the line of analysis first developed by Levi Strauss.

5 W. Caudill and G. de Vos, "Achievement, culture and personality: the case of the Japanese Americans", *American Anthropologist*, 1956, 58, 1102-1126.

6 And also the idea that there may be genetic influences on some of the things which sociologists insist must always be due to culture and social structure, for a similar reason.

instable, not changing, situations. Hence we know surprisingly little about matters like how rapidly aspirations change. There is some evidence that some poor people in America have distinctly lower aspirations than those who are better off, presumably as a means of coping with their deprivation. But how rapidly will their aspirations rise if the possibilities for realising them are enhanced? To what extent can aspirations learnt before adulthood be increased? Do low aspirations (in terms of higher education, job status, housing) in some way block the take-up of new opportunities? We do not really know, and the situational approach does not lead us to want to know.

However, proponents of a cultural approach are not likely to be of much help for these questions either. Culturalists tend to assume the causal primacy of cultural factors as situationalists assume the situational. Levi Strauss's cognitive systems, eerily disembodied from social processes, are only extreme instances of a common failing. But at least Levi Strauss is analytical. With few exceptions, the writers who have used the idea of a culture of poverty have used it as no more than a descriptive device. While their data is useful, they have developed few theoretical constructs. Situationalists, then, cannot simply say that culture is for someone else to worry about; the onus for arriving at a general and systematic justification for bringing cultural factors into their analyses is theirs.

Perhaps the most promising framework for tackling the issues raised by the idea of a culture of poverty is that sketched by Frank Parkin in a discussion of class inequality and meaning-systems.[7] (Parkin, incidentally, is a Marxist sociologist—if a clear and simple writing style does not count as a disqualification.) He begins by recognizing that individuals do not construct their social worlds in terms of a wholly personal vision, but with organizing concepts which are part of a public meaning-system. What then are the major public meaning-systems 'available' in a society? He distinguishes three major meaning-systems available in most Western societies, each of which derives from a different social source and each of which promotes a different moral interpretation of class inequality: 1. the *dominant* value system, which promotes the endorsement of existing inequality, and which promotes among the subordinate class a definition of the reward structure in either *deferential* or *aspirational* terms; 2. the *subordinate* value system, which promotes *accommodative* responses to inequality and low status, and which is generated in the milieu of local working-class communities; and 3. the *radical* value system, which promotes an oppositional interpretation of inequality, and which is generated by a mass political party based on the working class. Variations in the culture of poor/subordinate groups or individuals depend to some extent on their access to these meaning-systems. Occupation, or relationship to the means of production, is one obvious influence on access. Parkin goes some way towards describing the structure of these meaning-systems, and identifying the factors which incline individuals to draw their ideas from one or other of them. One can see immediately how ideas of the culturalists about the structure of cultural systems might contribute to the development of the argument, within a framework which embraces the material and physical constraints on action which culturalists are prone to ignore. It is a big step beyond the crude 'culture of poverty' idea. But Parkin says nothing about the question which is at the forefront of the culture of poverty literature: to what extent does attachment to one meaning-system, one programme, influence (facilitate, hinder) change to another when circumstances change. He remains too much a situationalist.

7 F. Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order*, St. Albans, Paladin, 1972, Ch. 3.